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# Effects of Teacher Prompting Techniques on the Writing Performance of Fourth and Fifth Graders

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EFFECTS OF TEACHER PROMPTING TECHNIQUES ON THE  
WRITING PERFORMANCE OF FOURTH AND FIFTH GRADERS

A dissertation submitted to  
the Graduate College of Marshall University  
in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education  
in  
Curriculum and Instruction

by

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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my amazing daughter, Elizabeth Jane Allenger, for the levity she brings to every situation.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study was a quantitative research investigation to determine the effects of teacher prompting techniques on the writing performance of 137 fourth and fifth graders from two parochial schools in West Virginia. Over a two-week period from March, 2014, to April, 2014, researchers collected writing samples with three typologies of prompting; no prompting, general prompting, and content specific prompting. The major outcome variables included were the numbers of words, number of sentences, and average sentence length, and writing ease and complexity level using the Flesch Kincaid Readability and The Flesch Reading Ease. Data analysis was accomplished by applying several types of descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. The results showed no significant differences in students' word productions or sentence lengths across the types of teacher writing prompts. However, a trend emerged which suggested writing complexity scores increased as teacher prompting became more content specific.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

For the past 20-30 years an emphasis on writing instruction in elementary schools has been forced invariably onto the back burner. Since the advent of No Child Left Behind (National Education Association, 2013) and its predecessor, Elementary Secondary Education Act *Pub.L. 89-10, 79 Stat. 27, 20 U.S.C. ch.70*, schools and teachers have been progressively preoccupied with addressing state and federal compliance mandates for reading and math achievement (National Education Association, 2013). Likewise, allocation of instructional time has been skewed to meet these needs as teachers strived to prepare students to achieve proxies of “on level” via year-end, one trial standardized test measures.

Nevertheless, currently across the United States leaders in educational reform are building support (National Commission on Writing, 2003) for policy makers to give more priority to the assessment of writing achievement by including it in the existing year-end compliance measures through Common Core State Standards (Pimental & Rigney, 2010). While this practice may prove an important change in policy, it does appear to prioritize testing over good instruction, thus placing a focus creating assessments rather than ensuring a consistent and focused approach to writing instruction. Writing is a complex process of cognitive and perceptual skills; it takes time, a gradual, progressive process with repetition, feedback, reflection, and revision (Bogard & McMackin, 2012). If such a change in policy results in greater allocation of time for writing instruction, then are classroom teachers prepared with current knowledge and skills for kindling effective written expression?

That teachers could lack such knowledge and know-how is understandable, in part due to the national emphasis described previously. However, the lack of such knowledge and skill

about how to plan and teach writing lessons is more likely the result of the very modest amount of training received in most initial teacher preparation programs (Allender, 2000). Because a language arts methods course includes other components (e.g., communication, handwriting, storytelling and children's literature), writing methods most likely comprise a small proportion of the content (West Virginia Department of Education Policy, 2013). Equally, quality writing techniques and strategies could never be acquired in one course.

Once hired into the profession, teachers face national mandates and related pressures previously noted for math and reading performance (Hinde, 2005). Although teachers will engage in professional development, teachers may choose professional development activities that will help them in their respective classroom roles and responsibilities. This choice may not aid in writing methods as an emphasis. The writing process takes time and incubation (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2007). The reality is that instructional time is already stretched too thinly, and teaching another subject that is time consuming is not an affordable priority for most classroom teachers (National Commission on Writing, 2003). Consequently, considering the time available, training is imperative so that teachers acquire substance and depth in their writing practices in an instructional setting that is burdened by so many other competing factors (Calkins, 1986).

These competing factors have derived from the evolution of writing practices in schools over the past 50 years. The following overview describes the various contexts of how writing instruction has been implemented in schools and how that has led to a current national perspective.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Several significant historical periods mark the evolution of writing instruction trends in elementary schools in the U.S. in the past 50 years. Additionally, a number of larger social

and educational national events influenced schooling in America and certainly the fate of writing instruction. These events have complicated the issues of writing instruction and perhaps helped to achieve a national consensus of what writing is and how it should be constructed and delivered.

### **Writing Instruction Prior to 1960**

Prior to the 1960s, writing instruction focused mainly on the form of writing that emphasized grammar, spelling, mechanics, and penmanship. The method focused primarily on drills to improve sentence mechanics rather than on composition. During this time, writing was also used as an assessment tool to demonstrate content knowledge (Hawkins & Razali, 2012).

Concurrently, two major social/political issues influenced the nation and its schools; “racial and social discrimination” and “school segregation.” In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the issue of separate but (not) equal schooling in the landmark decision *Brown vs. Board of Education*, which would preside over the entrance of racial minorities into the nation’s schools (Davidson, Meador, Pollock, Prettyman & Barrett, 2005). In 1957, the nation was alarmed by the launches of Sputnik I & Sputnik II into space by the Soviet Union. Therefore, politicians rushed to enact The National Defense Education Act of 1958 (The National Defense Education Act of 1958) designed to strengthen public schooling and teacher training for improving the teaching of math, science, and foreign languages (Case, 1960). Teachers and schools then took on the task of creating and revamping curricula in all disciplines to emphasize content knowledge and skills. Unfortunately, writing instruction was not at the top of these initiatives.



## **Writing Instruction in the 1960s**

The 1960s ushered in an era of freedom for the individual to make choices without the confines of traditional standards. The movement of writing instruction mirrored a national trend of freedom and opportunity for individuals to make choices (Murray, 1969).

Additionally, the 1960s welcomed in The Civil Rights Act in 1964 (National Archives and Records Administration, 2013). This was followed by the Elementary and Secondary Act in 1965 (Congress of the U.S., Washington, DC. House 1965). The nation collectively questioned its social and political values and began to uphold the rights and privileges of the individual, thus challenging the status quo and authority. This movement found its way into most national institutions including the educational system. With respect to writing, teachers were no longer the final judge of a written piece, armed to find errors and assign grades. Instead, they served as writing coaches who read student work and provided feedback. The writing process movement became a social statement challenging established practices and a teaching method designed to encourage students to write. Donald Murray described the writing process as a recursive sequence of steps from prewriting to final draft for a clearly defined process of writing development (Murray, 1969). Researchers studying competent writers such as Emig (1971) indicated the writing process was not linear, but was a recursive process which could be activated at any time during writing. This method of writing focused on the process, not the product and the locus of control moved from teacher-centered to student-centered (Altan & Trombly, 2001).

Thus, students were encouraged to select topics, format, and medium. The writing process method encouraged writers to continually revise and edit as they went along, with the emphasis on meaning instead of correctness. Young writers were encouraged to simply begin writing. Writing without over-analyzing “keeps you [the writer] ahead of the censor, the

doubter within, the police grammarian, and the state trooper speller who applies premature criticism to a draft” (Murray, 1993 p. 4). Writing instruction was freed from an overemphasis on mechanics and grammar, and a new focus was placed on expressing the content of the message. Though the teaching of writing would seem to have less structure and, therefore, be more relaxed, this method was potentially stressful method for teachers. This stress was due to the lack of strict guidelines about how said methods were to be taught and evaluated and the need for guidance to learn this approach. Consequently, teachers were not prepared for this teaching strategy (Routman, 1997).

Prior to this paradigm shift, instruction focused on the final product and research publications mirrored that concept of writing. Moore (Moffett & Wagner, 1992) compiled a summary of 504 journal articles that investigated writing and composition. Of those 504 articles only two focused on process over product. The teacher was the keeper of knowledge; therefore writing instruction, related ideas, and critiques came from the teacher. However, when the shift was made to process, each writer became a teacher to other writers. In 1968, James Moffett created an interactive language arts curriculum which coincided with the idea that students would help one another on the journey of learning and writing from a perspective that the writer’s experiences were the curriculum and topics (Moffett & Wagner, 1992). The prevailing writing methodology was to use writing as a communication tool to express one’s ideas. Students were encouraged not to accept absolute truths, but instead, to use reading and writing as a tool to express their beliefs.

The teaching method of incorporating the writing process into the existing writing program continued to be used while encouraging students to learn through formulating their own answers via various self-selected means (Moffet & Wagner, 1992). Regardless of Moffet and Wagner’s new curriculum and Emig’s (1971) research, these new ideas were not being

advanced at the classroom level. This gap was evidenced in part via the concerns expressed by teachers at various levels in the educational system and teachers seeking the model that students absorb writing without the time and work involved (Calkins, 1986).

### **Writing Instruction in the 1970s**

In 1973, alarmed by the significant number of college students who wrote with extreme difficulty, the University of California at Berkeley faculty assembled a group of writing teachers from the local area to discuss the then-current state of writing. The group decided to bring together outstanding K-12 teachers of writing to share ideas in an intensive summer institute initially called the Bay Area Writing Project. This initiative was a federally and privately funded program which grew throughout California. In 1974, when it received funding to expand nationally, it became known as the National Writing Project (NWP). The U.S. Office of Education complimented the National Writing Project as the “most effective staff development activity ever promulgated” (Simmons, 2009, p. 39). Forty-one additional sites were added to the National Writing Project, and by 2011, the project had grown to more than 200 sites and summer workshops (Simmons, 2009).

The National Writing Project consisted of summer training workshops ranging from two to five weeks in duration that were taught by veteran summer institute teachers. The days consisted of writing from a personal and professional perspective, sharing in writing groups, and dissecting effective writing instruction demonstrations (Whitney, 2008). This ‘teacher-teaching-teachers’ model began with teachers first seeing themselves as writers to better teach budding writers. The NWP’s core methodology was that writing can be taught at any age level, and many methods may be used to teach writing by learning from exemplary teachers of writing. The emphasis of the instruction was on writing frequently, with the teacher modeling good writing which, in turn, shapes better teaching practices (Lieberman & Wood, 2003).

However, Whitney noted “with respect to the impact on classroom practice and on student outcome, clear evidence has been difficult to produce” (Whitney, Blau, Bright, Cabe, Dewar, Levin, Macias & Rogers, 2008, p. 7). Quantifiable data of student performance were difficult to determine, yet other positive results led indirectly to changes in the classroom. For example, studies of teacher empowerment (Dierking & Fox, 2012), teacher transformation (Blau, 2011), and teacher retention (Lorenzo, 2007) reinforced the idea that changing a teacher will change student performance. Still, some critics reported that the impact of the National Writing Project (NWP) actually created little change in how writing instruction was executed. Citizens Against Government Waste argued the NWP’s idea of how to teach writing was not any better than a traditional method and complained that annually, \$3 billion has been spent on teacher improvement (Rae, 2011). Past director of National Writing Project, Richard Sterling, has continued to point to the vast network of teachers who provide quality professional development that serves many teachers and students while operating cost-effectively (Goldberg, 1998). Former executive director of the NWP Dr. Sharon Washington has reiterated the commitment to provide high quality professional development to teachers in all content areas and grade levels (National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, 2015). Despite the results of 16 studies that demonstrated that the students of NWP teachers outperformed the comparison groups on seven elements of writing, federal funding was withdrawn in spring 2011 due to stringent budget cuts of many educational programs (NWP, 2013).

In addition to stressing writing as a process, the NWP also advocated writing in all subject areas, and writing instruction became the domain of English courses and language arts classrooms (Zemellmann, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005). Writing has been shown to potentially help students understand content and construct meaning (Knipper & Duggan, 2008). This focus on writing to learn often meets with concerns that teachers are emphasizing the content

and not the correctness of grammar and form, though research has demonstrated that grammar and mechanics taught in isolation are not productive to master either writing or grammar. In fact, writing across the curriculum has been implemented in college as a viable method to increase content learning (Newell, Koukis, & Boster, 2007). The National Writing Project promoted the process of writing but most pre-service teachers were taught the writing process as a theory instead of a strategy put into daily teaching. Most teachers do not put the construct into actual practice with students in the classroom (Allen, 2003).

### **Writing Instruction in the 1980s**

The 1980s saw a significant decline in federal funding for elementary and secondary education, particularly during the presidency of Ronald Reagan (Verstegen & Clark, 1988). The quality of public schools and student achievement continued to be on the minds of the public largely because of emerging global competition with Japan and with European countries whose school systems produced students with better tests scores than U.S. students. President Reagan and conservative politicians blamed this deficit on the inferior quality of public schooling and deemed the nation at risk (Graham, 2013). Various reforms followed, including standardized testing requirements for students, a core curriculum, and the whole language movement that encouraged the teacher to incorporate all disciplines to start with the entire language through literature to explore ideas and concepts instead of looking at the small details of the language. Writing can begin with few or no known letters. In the past, teachers delayed writing instruction until a child knew how to read (Calkins, 1986). Now the immersion of language through reading and writing in all subject areas was the preferred method through implicit and incidental exposure (Calkins, 1986). Goodman (1993) was on the forefront of the whole language movement that pointed out how classroom teachers were encouraged to make their own instructional decisions because they knew their students best and set out to

create learning experiences to teach reading and writing. The approach included a combination of short informal lessons and an abundance of practice communicating ideas to genuine audiences through writing. The students wrote to become engaged and to tell their story (Murray, 1993). From the open format of the whole language approach to learning, the writing workshop approach emerged next as a significant instructional method of teaching writing at the elementary level (Adams, 1990). The writing workshop method began by combining reading, writing and other subjects into writing instruction (Murray, 1993). Children began to take responsibility for their own writing by selecting topics, sharing with peers and making choices about what to revise. The workshop format allowed the opportunity for students to work at their own pace through the writing process while each student made personal writing progress (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2007).

The writing workshop approach was exemplified by the work of Nancy Atwell (Atwell, 2014) who encouraged classrooms to be situated as genuine writing environments. The writing process was structured into a workshop format that encouraged students to work through recursive steps without regard for schedules or plans, considering only the individual writer and written piece. The steps of the process approach were loosely termed; prewriting, writing, revising, and editing. This approach mirrored a political and social ideology of introspection as applied to best teach children (Calkins, 1986).

The whole language movement was frequently on the receiving end of complaints and frustration due to a perceived lack of basic skill instruction (Loffin, 2013). Whole Language instruction also afforded fewer opportunities for frequent testing that could prove merit with the teaching approach. The time for student writing was a positive result, though with little explicit instruction, simply allowing the students time to write in response to experiences and books left the writers with little guidance (Loffin, 2013).

## **Writing Instruction in the 1990s**

The 1990s saw the rise of “standards” geared to specific outcomes and benchmarks by which to gauge the effects of teaching and learning in schools. These benchmarks were derived from federal testing requirements that mandated states to provide data demonstrating improvement through content standards and the related assessments to validly measure progress (Moon, Callahan, & Tomlinson, 2003). The push for more teacher accountability led to narrowing the curriculum and focusing on test preparation.

The new method for writing instruction encouraged a highly interactive approach that aimed to scaffold and support students throughout the writing process and carefully wean the supports away as they became more competent at various aspects of writing (Englert, 1992). The dialogue consisted of problem-solving discussions with much of the cognitive decision making derived from the teacher in the early phases of writing instruction (Madigan, 2007).

## **Writing Instruction in the 2000s and Beyond**

How to structure and teach writing instruction was not emphasized with the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the related federal Reading First mandate of No Child Left Behind (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) put accountability on the forefront of political and educational conversations. The main tools for evaluating were standardized tests at the state and national levels. The reauthorization of No Child Left Behind reinforced this approach and schools and teachers remained under the pressure of meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) (Ed.gov, 2010). Not only were schools required to meet AYP by 2014, all children were expected to meet grade level expectations in reading and math. However, recent federal political and policy developments have given the states greater autonomy for selecting and verifying such achievement. It is unclear how these developments will affect writing instruction, which has been left out of such initiatives for the most part.

In addition, with the passage of NCLB, \$1 billion dollars was devoted to Reading First and \$100 million to Early Reading First (U. S. Department of Education 2001). Writing instruction was also not included in the five foundational components for reading advocated by the National Reading Panel and also by the International Reading Association (IRA). These groups took the position that the inclusion of writing in the classroom was paramount for reading and writing development (International Reading Association, 2011). Speaking for the Literacy Research Association, Michael Pressley agreed with the IRA's position concerning the critical need for writing to be included in the list of critical literacy skills to be taught. However, the No Child Left Behind policy enacted did not place an emphasis on writing to be included in the language arts curriculum (International Reading Association, 2011).

Currently, momentum is building for writing instruction to be allocated additional classroom instructional minutes. Many states are beginning to include writing as a reported component in year-end standardized tests. For example, West Virginia had previously allocated a statewide writing assessment with little weight in terms of school Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). However, beginning in 2009, the writing component was given a significant weighting of 40% of the total reading and language arts score (West Virginia Department of Education, 2013). If this trend continues in other states such as Virginia and Ohio, it is possible that writing instruction will be emphasized on year-end state level assessments.

It is clear from the discussion that writing instruction in schools has been in flux over the past 50 years. It has both gained and lost momentum depending on national education trends and priorities. No consistent or focused set of national common methodologies of writing instruction has emerged. Nevertheless writing instruction has been structured into the instructional day in elementary school grades, albeit invariably and sparingly.

The recent change in policy among some states for including the assessment of writing



achievement in annual state testing programs portends the beginning of greater concern for including appropriate writing instruction in the elementary school curricula. Such a change has the potential to bring greater attention to the need for quality teaching methods and strategies, particularly for teaching strategies substantiated by exemplary best practice or sound research in classroom settings. Elementary grade teachers are important audiences for practices that can elicit writing performance and improvement for their students.

### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The purpose of this investigation is to determine the effects of selected teacher prompting techniques on student writing performance. Given the consecutive conditions of no prompting, general prompting and content specific prompting, it may be expected that there will be significant changes in the number of words, number of sentences, and average sentence length generated in the writing samples among fourth and fifth graders. A corollary to the investigation is to relate student writing performance and the students' readability levels to the Flesch Kincaid Readability Assessment. If a student is composing more words and sentences, has the difficulty level of the writing improved, or is the production of words and sentences an unrelated factor to the reading level difficulty of the written composition? A final purpose is to gather information about text difficulty and whether differential prompting increases the written complexity of students' writing. Does the prompting at the beginning of the writing process encourage a greater level of text difficulty and reading ease?

### **Research Questions**

The following specific research questions were posed to determine the effects of various types of teacher prompting on the writing achievement of fourth and fifth graders.

1. Does the type of teacher delivered prompting condition, of no prompting, general prompting or content specific prompting make a significant difference in the total number of words written by student in a writing assessment?
2. Does the type of teacher delivered prompting condition, of no prompting, general prompting or content specific prompting make a significant difference in the total number of sentences written by students in a writing assessment?
3. Does the type of teacher delivered prompting condition, of no prompting, general prompting or content specific prompting make a significant difference in the writing complexity of student writing in a writing assessment?
4. Does the type of teacher delivered prompting condition, of no prompting, general prompting or content specific prompting make a significant difference in the Flesch Kincaid Reading Ease scores of student writing in a writing assessment?

## **OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS**

### **Types of Teacher Delivered Prompting**

**No Prompting.** Refers to no response or stimuli given by the teacher to the student about his or her writing composition content while in the process of writing.

**General Prompting.** Refers to statements that are not directed to a specific writer and their composition. Instead the prompting is geared toward all students. Example: “Keep writing. Fill the page, and include a lot of detail.”

**Content Specific Prompting.** Refers to teacher comments that are specific to individual students to prompt writing performance. For example: “I didn’t

know you went to Columbus this weekend.” Or “Tigers are very scary.”

### **Writing Performance**

Refers to writing performance determined by the number of words, number of sentences, average sentence length, Flesch Kincaid Readability level and Flesch Reading Ease level

**Flesch Kincaid Readability Level:** Refers to the reading level of a text or passage on a U.S. school grade level and reported as grade level and month. (Example: Level 6.2 means that a 6<sup>th</sup> grader in the 2<sup>nd</sup> month of school should be able to read and comprehend the text).

**Flesch Reading Ease Level:** Refers to the rating of text on a 100 point scale based on the average number of syllables per word and average number of words per sentence. The greater the score, the easier the reading level of the text is. (Example: 90 points indicates that most 11 year old students should be able to read and comprehend the text).

### **Delimitations**

1. Teacher prompting techniques are limited to the methods chosen by the researcher.
2. The length of the prompting intervention was limited to two weeks.
3. The research context includes two specific parochial schools.

### **Limitations**

1. Samples for the investigation were nonrandom.
2. Small sample sizes occurred due to purposeful sampling.

## **RATIONALE**

In the Educational Resource Information Center (ERIC), approximately 130,000 articles exist on reading instruction compared to half that for writing instruction (Farnan & Dahl, 2008). This disproportion points to a focus of research on current reading instruction compared to writing instruction and related instructional methodologies. The National Reading Panel (2012) reports “A recent review of research on writing found that only 5% of the total writing instruction studies examined were conducted with elementary school children, with even fewer studies employing experimental or quasi-experimental designs” (National Reading Panel 2012, p.1). The majority of research has focused on the middle school level. Yet, the results from the secondary levels show an alarming deficit in writing performance that is traced directly to the elementary classroom. The national achievement data show a significant deficit in test scores among high school students in West Virginia and elsewhere. West Virginia’s 8th graders are behind the top performing states by 14%-20% in all of the major content areas including writing (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). The National Assessment of Education report only one of every five high school seniors acquires the required writing knowledge and skills (Greenwald, Persky, Ambell, & Mazzeo, 1999). In 2007, only 24% of 12th-graders scored in the proficient writer classification (Salahu-Din, Persky, & Miller, 2008).

Obviously, these deficits begin much earlier than middle and high school and continue beyond for those students who enter higher education. Writing to convey content understanding is the general form of assessment. However, if writing skills are lacking then overall achievement can be seriously affected (Pullin, 2005). Achieve, Inc., reported that college instructors estimate that 50% of freshman are not prepared for the rigor of university

writing and composition expectations (Peter D. Hart Research Associates, 2005).

Consequently, a need emerged to investigate best practices and conduct research at the elementary school level where students are in development.

Building a current research knowledge base of findings relevant to effective writing instruction is important for classroom teachers. Many, if not most, practitioners enter the teaching ranks with minimal preservice preparation in writing instruction. The average writing requirement in teacher education preparation programs consists of one course that is tightly embedded within the total language arts program (West Virginia Department of Education, 2011). As a result, very little emphasis was given to writing instruction and the majority of teachers state their professional education courses left them less than prepared to teach writing (Gilbert & Graham, 2010).

In summary, practitioners need current empirical research quantify the impact of teacher behaviors on student writing achievement and to identify specific instructional methodologies for teachers to modify instruction for optimal growth in expression and writing achievement. Elementary and secondary classroom teachers along with reading and writing interventionists who have direct, instructional interactions with students are the primary targets for research-based writing practices. However, others such as college teacher education personnel, state and local curriculum specialists, and professional development programmers will want or need to know about the research effects of writing achievement, and these groups may be particularly interested in the results of empirical writing studies.

College faculty in general, and teacher education faculty in particular, are responsible for preparing teacher candidates to successfully instruct their students with best practices for all subject areas. Yet, with the lack of specific training, new teachers are not adequately prepared to teach a subjective skill such as writing that they perceived as time consuming. Specific

teaching practices that can demonstrate improved writing achievement should warrant considerable time and energy in teacher preparation courses.

Public school curriculum specialists and state and county board administrators are uniquely empowered to make decisions based on current data with direct application potential. These the top decision makers can suggest instructional practices can be suggested that results based on quantifiable data on specific teaching strategies designed to improve writing achievement.

The same opportunity would also extend to professional development opportunities at the school and district level to provide up-to-date teaching strategies that encourage a change in teacher behaviors to elicit maximum writing skills and achievement. Once teachers are practicing, professional development is perhaps the only means of capturing this audience that has the single greatest impact on a student's educational career. Teaching writing requires considerable commitment, expertise, and effort, accompanied by the motivation to use substantiated research based practices (Pressley, Mohan, Raphael, & Fingeret, 2007). Therefore, the commitment to ongoing, quality professional development is paramount to initiate and sustain quality writing instruction.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this investigation was to determine the effects of various kinds of teacher prompting techniques on the writing performance of intermediate grade school youngsters. Overall, the review of literature in this chapter suggest that the topic of writing instruction continues to be of significant interest and importance to a large number of educators throughout the United States. Additionally, the review presents broad and varied solutions, albeit inconclusive, to what many educators consider a neglected curriculum area in the nation's schools.

The review of related literature has been organized and presented here within the context of four sub-topic domains related to the topics, variables and issues associated with the effects on student writing performance and achievement. These domains include the following areas: effects on student writing performance, teacher professional development, instructional process and practice, and student motivation.

Each of these areas includes a selection of educational research publications summarized to represent the breadth and depth of existing research regarding the development and progression of children's writing performance. Summaries necessarily focus on the purposes, relevant methodological details, major outcomes, and relevant effects and conclusions. Studies show similarities, discrepancies (pros and cons), and even contradictions about best practice. The review also contains useful ideas and considerations relevant to the current investigation. Likewise, the review has led to further research issues and needs put forth in this investigation.

## **Student Writing Performance**

The domain of students writing performance provides evidence about very specific practices tested continually to enhance writing performance. While writing achievement is certainly the end product, such achievement has evolved in stages over a long and continuous period, and not necessarily exclusive to the K-12 school years. The term “performance” is purposefully emphasized to highlight the need to generate writing on a daily basis and to increase the frequency and volume of word and sentence production as important approximations leading to achievement. Good readers read--so good writers must write. Consequently, in this domain, selected studies demonstrate important connections between different kinds of methodologies and techniques for improving writing performance.

Student writing performance focuses on the many aspects that compose written communication. A final determination of writing performance is frequently measured by total word count and sentence length. Rose and Sweda (1997) investigated creating a plan for journal writing time that can capture the students’ attention and encourage them to write their best. The research consisted of establishing a baseline for the first two weeks to observe off-task behavior to evaluate the students’ attitude toward writing, and to measure the students writing based on fluency. The intervention phase consisted of guiding students through visual imagery that was to be incorporated into journal writing. The researchers measured fluency, which they defined as “a count of words written by each subject for each day of the study. Although the number of words does not necessarily correspond to quality of writing, it does represent a positive step for students who have not been copious writers” (Rose & Sweda, 1997, p. 23). The results demonstrated that the fluency rate of the students decreased with each day of imagery intervention. “The average number of words written during the pre-intervention was 63 yet the average number of words written after the intervention was 44; thus



the class' average fluency dropped 19 words from pre- to post- intervention'' (Rose & Sweda, 1997, p. 27). This change was a decrease of 85% for the 20 students in the study. The authors explained the decrease in scores was due to potentially inflated initial scores because the students aimed to please the researchers so that perhaps they wrote substantially more during the initial days. Other reasons cited were frequent absences, outside interruptions, and students spending their writing time drawing (Rose & Sweda, 1997).

Geisler, Hessler, Gardner, and Lovelace (2009) studied the effects of self-counting and creating a synonym list on the total words written and the number of different words written by five African American first graders who were tested as high achieving based on district benchmark testing. An additional fifteen students in the class completed the same writing assignments, but the researchers gave additional intervention instructions to only the five research participants. The interventions consisted of counting and graphing the number of words and the number of different words written in the first three minutes. A second intervention consisted of the reviewing a list of synonyms for commonly used words. The dependent variables consisted of the number of different words and the total number of words. The results of the intervention demonstrated an increase in different words used and an increase in the number of words used. Geisler et al. (2009) concluded high achieving students need responsive guidance to improve their writing performance. Encouraging them to count their number of words and to use synonyms to create variety in their writing does improve their writing and allows the teacher to monitor the writing for ways students' writing can improve (Geisler, Hessler, Gardner, and Lovelace 2009).

Lienemann and Reid (2008) studied the effects of self-regulated strategy instruction with five students with ADHD deemed to have writing difficulties based on teacher assessment while writing opinion narratives. The study established a baseline score of writing opinion

narratives. The students were instructed to use planning strategies to select a topic, to organize their notes, and to use a writing plan that included a topic sentence, details, and a conclusion. Although the students wrote independently, their papers were graded for features used such as topic sentence, various details, and a concluding sentence. The research included establishing a baseline score, an instructional period of a writing strategy, an opportunity for independent strategy practice, followed up with a maintenance period. Each writing sample was scored according to the frequency of essay elements, number of words, and overall quality. The number of words increased by an average of 440%, including a mean length of 18 to 93 words for student 1, 27-104 words for student 2, 34-131 words for student 3 and 19-68 words for student 4. An overall increase in quality showed changes ranging from 1.2 to 4.5 words for these students. The investigators concluded drawn from the mean changes suggest that the students wrote higher quality essays that were longer and scored more writing elements based upon the intervention (Lienemann and Reid, 2008).

Knudson (2001) supported prior findings that grade level, gender and attitude of the writer are positively correlated with writing success. In this study, 430 subjects (198 girls, 232 boys) in grades K-6 from low to middle socioeconomic status participated. All subjects were scored on the state standardized reading achievement test, and additionally, one classroom of each grade level was administered writing attitude questionnaires. The questionnaires consisted of 19 Likert-scale questions. The children wrote from a prompt that related to rainy days with 20 minutes to respond and were scored by two raters on a scale from 1(low) to 6(high) (Knudson, 2001).

The analysis was a stepwise multiple regression. The dependent variable was holistic scores and the independent variables were students' writing attitude scores, grade level, and gender. The results from the study validate that attitude toward writing is connected to the

student grade level with only minimal connection to attitude and gender. The students' grade level accounted for 40% of the variance, yet the attitudes accounted for only 3.8% and gender for only 1.7% of the variance (Knudson, 2001).

Graham, Berninger, and Fan (2007) investigated the relationship between writing attitude, writing achievement, and schooling improvement. The participants were 128 first graders and 113 third graders with 65% Caucasian, 23% Asian, 8% African American, and less than 1% of other races. The total group had initial writing skills within the average range on intelligence tests with a mean score of 100, and the researchers assessed the students using a standardized assessment on writing expression and fluency (Graham, Berninger, & Fan, 2007).

For the study, each student wrote on a given topic and each completed a writing attitude survey which assessed the motivation level of the students (Graham, Berninger, and Fan, 2007). The writing samples were based on number of words and the word length and overall quality of composition from 1 (low) to 7 (high) based on ideas, organization, grammar, and word use. Examples of variables included writing at home for fun, writing during free time, writing in school, and writing versus playing. Although current literature has suggested motivation does play a part in student writing, this idea has been difficult to validate empirically (Graham, et al., 2007). Nevertheless, Graham et al.'s (2007) results demonstrated writing attitude influences writing performance instead of the opposite effect that achievement influences the attitude. The variables overall were related to the writing attitude variable with significance in each case indicated by all  $z$  scores exceeding 1.96. These results do indicate some support that motivation does shape writing performance.

## **Teacher Professional Development**

Encouraging quality instruction begins with quality professional development. In order for students to achieve their best writing, teachers must be skilled and committed to teaching writing. When teachers recognize a need for improvement in their teaching methodologies, they do become more skilled at teaching writing (Pressley, et al 2007). With a focus on teaching teachers first, a level of confidence about how to best deliver writing instruction can lead to a greater chance of making significant changes. However, being knowledgeable about current writing practices may not be enough because for teachers to truly understand the writing process, they must actively work through the steps of the process as a writer (Calkins, 1986). Professional development has the potential to improve writing performance and achievement as demonstrated in the studies that follow.

Joyce and Showers (1983) examined the idea that professional development is most successful if conducted over an extended time. The study consisted of five, fourth grade teachers and their classes; two of the classes received training in new writing instruction strategies. None of these teachers used the strategies prior to receiving the professional development. After the professional development, the treatment group ( $n=2$ ) changed its mode of teaching from a presentational to an environmental mode that consisted of the teacher and student using activities in an engaging manner. The control group did not change its teaching style. The results indicated a statistically significant difference in favor of the experimental group over the control group (Joyce & Showers, 1983). The authors determined that one-day professional development sessions are ineffective to change teacher behavior as demonstrated by the control group that made no significant changes to its teaching style based on short professional development meetings without follow-up. Teachers do not necessarily take information learned in professional development to the classroom. Results showed limited

changes occur in terms of instruction or student achievement after limited professional development. Learning how to teach writing requires time and effort because of the need to model, teach, and practice. Professional development over extended time with the opportunity for practice demonstrates that teaching can be improved (Joyce & Showers, 1983).

The premises that teacher behaviors do affect student outcomes and that, moreover, the teacher makes the difference in student performance have been clearly demonstrated in current research. These points have been clearly described by Tienken and Achilles (2003), who monitored differences in the writing samples of their students among teachers who received professional development compared to teachers who did not receive professional development. The subjects were five fourth grade teachers and their 98 students. Prior to professional development, all five teachers were identified as using a presentational mode of writing instruction, that consisted of objectives, lectures, a review of exemplars, assignments, and feedback. The teachers directed all the classroom behaviors and outcomes (Tienken & Achilles, 2003). Two teachers, with 36 of the students, participated in professional development that directly affected student behaviors and feedback related to problem solving using the communication/change structure in the design. This experimental group included instruction of student interactions through discussions, opposing arguments, and problems posed to the group at large. The other three teachers received no professional development and continued to teach in the presentational mode, characterized by lectures, specific objectives, and teacher directed assignments (Tienken & Achilles, 2003).

The data collected were teacher ratings of student writing samples using the *New Jersey Registered Holistic Scoring Rubric* that included four areas: content, usage, sentence structure, and mechanics. Each area was keyed to a 6 point numerical rating. The mean score of the experimental group ( $n=36$ ) was 3.39 with a standard deviation ( $SD$ ) of .99. The control group

mean ( $n=62$ ) was 2.97 with a *SD* of 1.04 and a *p* value of .052. The results demonstrated that the writing achievement of the students in the experimental class outperformed the students in the control classroom. Additionally, based on student self-assessment, the students responded that they were able to apply the information provided by their teachers to make significant revisions. The researchers concluded that professional development can be empirically verified and can improve teaching and student performance (Tienken & Achilles, 2003).

Professional development has the potential to improve student performance, but the question of what type and when are these trainings most beneficial. Piasta, et. al (2012) sought to determine if a well-established early education professional development program could improve teacher and student conversations by participation. They assigned 49 preschool teachers randomly to the professional development treatment ( $n= 25$ ) group or to the comparison group ( $n=24$ ). The teachers collectively taught in 38 different low socioeconomic status schools. Ninety-six percent of the teachers were female, 67% were Caucasian, and 22% were black. Classrooms had a range of 16-20 students.

Those teachers in the experimental group received professional development about teacher and child conversations designed to elicit language skills and dialogue between the teacher and student. The teachers attended eight sessions that promoted exchanges to enrich children's language. Every two weeks the teachers' video-recorded and submitted a 20-minute teacher and child exchange. The videos were reviewed for reflection and missed opportunities of potential language enrichment. The comparison group received the same amount of professional development, but the topics were not about teacher and student interactions. Videos and generic feedback were given regarding the comparison teachers' videos (Piasta, et. al., 2012).

The results indicated that the experimental group possessed moderate feelings of self-efficacy ( $M=3.60$  and  $SD=0.50$ ). The composite scores for the interaction strategies were 2.67 (on a range from 0 to 5) as compared to the control group that scored 0.38 for language-interaction strategies. Overall, children in the treatment groups, produced more language than the comparison group did. Significance was found for total utterances with a  $p$  level, of .025: for number of different words, with a  $p$  level of .001 found and for mean utterance length with a  $p$ . 001 (Piasta, et al., 2012). In addition to utterances, the children in the treatment groups increased the variety of words used as compared to the comparison group. The effect of the professional development was immediate and had lasting effects on the interaction between the students and teacher that used language-rich strategies to improve language development.

Professional development for writing instruction has not gone unnoticed at state and district levels. Many programs have been implemented to offer continuing education and instruction for classroom teachers. In South Carolina, for example, Clemson University in 2008, initiated the Up-State Writing Project (National Writing Project, 2010). The project compared two different professional development writing programs implemented for 3rd, fourth, and fifth grade teachers in comparison schools. The focus was to determine the impact on teacher behavior and change. Quantitative measures included writing performance on pre-and-post prompted writing samples for all students. Although no appreciable differences were reported in the first year on selected writing outcomes, the focus on writing instruction by teachers in these schools was enhanced and given a new level of priority (Whitney, 2008).

*The Boston Science Partnership* (BSP) (Fields, Levy, Karelitz, Martinez-Gudapakkam, & Jablonski 2012) sought to determine if an investment in science professional development for classroom teachers would be beneficial. The purpose of the study was to see what would motivate teachers to participate in professional development. The BSP examined the state

science scores of the 34,401 middle and high-school students who were grouped teacher completion of selected professional development in various science subjects. Results showed that the percentages of students who passed their tests in biology, chemistry, and integrated science earned greater scores when their teachers had participated in the professional development programs. For example in biology, 70% of the students' teachers who took a biology professional development course passed the state test, compared to 55% for students of teachers who did not complete biology professional development. Participation in recent and content-focused professional development did matter; it resulted in a positive impact on student learning and performance. Moreover, the great majority of teachers indicated that their motivation to participate was a matter of gaining new instructional strategies and greater content knowledge (Fields, et al., 2012).

### **Student Motivation**

The topic of prompting relates readily to the area of motivation. Graves (1994) emphasized that writers want to hear the responses of others to continue to create. Prompting students while they are in the process of creating is motivating to a young writer. To determine a clear link to the effects of motivation compared to the effects of prompting, concrete examples of feedback or prompting were present in this research. Strategy training that encouraged the use of specific strategies to improved writing involved, for example, student self-talk that can be seen as motivational and encouraging to the writer. If a student self-talks, a self-generated motivating prompt such as 'keep writing,' or 'I put a lot of effort into this piece,' this self-talk can be characterized as prompting or self-feedback. When analyzing the student's open-ended responses, for student motivation, the researchers demonstrated that students rarely evaluated themselves negatively and were actually supplying themselves with affirming comments to continue writing (Fidalgo, Torrance, & Garcia, 2007). The idea that



motivation could be improved through authentic, genuine content-related prompting from the teacher is significant, even when the teacher is not supplying the motivation. Self-motivating comments have the potential to be internalized after similar comments from a teacher.

Students struggle with motivation in continuing to write. They will write until they perceive that all of their ideas are exhausted. At this critical point a teacher has the opportunity to help students to continue writing by providing a content-specific comment or question Campbell-Rush (2008). Campbell-Rush (2008) suggested adding the word “because” at the end of a student’s writing as he or she begins to struggle for new ideas. Using the word “because” after any writing sample encourages the students to continue to develop his or her idea and actually write more. Students are frequently unmotivated to write because the prompt is often high-stress and sometimes used as a form of punishment such as an apology letter or a repetitive list of behaviors the student will not use, instead of a positive communication tool (Graves 1975). However, this attitude is not just from the student writers. Emig (1977) reported that the attitude of the teachers was often quite negative, and this negative attitude also affected student motivation.

Mata (2011) examined the reading and writing motivation for 451 kindergarten children using a 16-item questionnaire to assess various aspects of the reading and writing process. Items were keyed to a 4-point scale indicating how important it was for a student to learn to write and the level of enjoyment from writing experiences. The importance of enjoyment of reading compared to writing was 3.55 to 3.46,  $t(450) = 3.931, p < .001$ . The importance of value of reading compared to writing was 3.67 to 3.59,  $t(450) = 5.175, p < .001$ . Their scores were statistically significant, favoring higher reading than writing scores. Reading seemed to be more motivating and pleasure-producing. The children also considered reading to be more important than writing. This study demonstrated that student motivation toward writing is

lower than their motivation for reading and that writing needs to be exceptionally motivating to students.

Lo and Hyland (2007) studied five identified students who spoke English as a second language (ESL students) ages 10 and 11 in Hong Kong to determine their motivation in writing. The researchers' purpose was to look at the students' and teachers' perspectives on writing, writing motivation, engagement, and the overall progress of student writing skills. The teacher began by using the prescribed writing program for six weeks; this intervention which consisted of pictures that would lead to the topic of the student's completed composition. The change of writing topics began with students writing about ideas that were connected to them personally and included writing for a specific audience beginning with their classmates. The results showed an increase in the number of words by 34%, from 112 to 150 words. When the students wrote a letter under the former prescribed writing program, the letter had a predetermined topic and audience as compared to the new lessons in which the letter allowed for student-selected topic and audience. The percent of increase for low-achieving students was substantially lower, yet these students wrote considerably more than with the former program. The researchers credited this increase to a student-selected audience and topic.

Brouwer (2012) also examined writing motivation for 272 students ages 8-10 who had learning impairments. The students completed a self-reporting questionnaire to determine writing motivation and a spelling test from a standardized measure. The spelling test results from the typically-developing (TD) students ( $M = 14.7$ ,  $SD = 3.6$ ) were statistically significant: ( $t(36) = 7.0$ ,  $p < .01$ ,) compared to the students with language impairment (LI) ( $M = .4$ ,  $SD = 5.2$ ). The writing motivation score differences were significant  $t(266) = 2.05$ ,  $p = .04$  for the TD group. The LI students ( $M = 2.68$ ,  $SD = .72$ ) reported lower levels of motivation than the

TD group of students ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = .68$ ). The results of this study determined that students with language impairments may have lower writing competence and intrinsic motivation than typically developing students. Even when spelling ability, gender, and grade are controlled, the language-impaired children perceived lesser competency and motivation.

However, Chohan (2010) conducted a study that examined student motivation on a school-wide basis by encouraging letter writing between students. The purpose of the study was to determine the relationship between children's attitude and motivation with a letter-mailing program. Subjects included 122 middle-income students and teachers. Survey data included student's attitudes toward writing and a follow-up evaluation after eight months. Findings suggested that students' motivation to write letters had increased by fifty percent, yet the students did not indicate that writing letters would improve their writing. The most significant changes from the initial survey to the final survey, were increases in scores of both boys and girls related to their reports that they were good writers. The boys' scores rose from 30% to 53% and the girls' scores improved from 47% to 74%. Eighty-four percent of the students initially marked that it was important to be a good writer and the final survey essentially showed the same outcome. The results indicated that even though the children were allowed to write letters to their friends, they did not respond that they enjoyed writing more, and they did not feel that their writing improved. From the data collected, the results indicated that students' enjoyment of letter writing has the potential to increase motivation and writing skills.

Wilson and Trainin (2007) studied factors of motivation in elementary students. For this study, 194 first-graders from low and middle socio-economic levels answered questions regarding self-efficacy, perceived competence and writing attributions to determine if they could differentiate between self-influences and how these influences related to literacy

achievement. To determine writing performance levels, the researchers used a 5-point rubric. To determine literacy motivation the researchers used the Early Literacy Motivation Scale (ELMS). Finally, students were interviewed to measure competence, self-efficacy, and factors that determined success or failure (Wilson & Trainin, 2007). To determine the relationship between self-efficacy and performance, a repeated-measures ANOVA was used for self-efficacy. The scale mean score was 6.2 for this measure, and the writing self-efficacy had a mean score of 6.79. The results were significant between the scale scores, with  $F(2, 196) = 2.19, p < .001$ . The Bonferroni adjustment demonstrated that all differences were significant at the  $p < .01$  level.

The results of the study indicated that first-grade students were able to differentiate self-efficacy between the components of literacy: reading, spelling and writing. The self-efficacy for writing was significantly higher than spelling and reading. The researchers found a strong effect between self-efficacy and achievement (Wilson & Trainin, 2007). Students who had high levels of achievement internalized their success based on high self-efficacy and effort. However, the students with lower writing achievement scores attributed the lack of success to external difficulties that were not considered in the current study.

### **Instructional Process and Practice**

Troia & Graham (2003) studied the effectiveness of explicit instruction using three strategies. Their subjects were twenty fourth and fifth grade students with an identified learning disability from two suburban elementary schools. The students were randomly assigned to the experimental group that received advanced strategy instruction within the writing process framework. The control group received instruction that all students received as part of the required writing curriculum. The students were tested to determine that no significant differences existed between the two groups regarding age, IQ, number of years

identified in a special education program, and reading and writing achievement. Graduate students were trained to work as instructors and closely followed plans and written logs to document comments and writing observations. The study consisted of students writing three story prompts: pretest, posttest and four weeks after the intervention. The treatment group received a similar amount of instructional time that included the planning strategies of purpose, goals, brainstorming and organizing ideas: these strategies were printed onto a chart for the students to review (Troia & Graham, 2003). The five components of story writing were included. An analysis of the students writing included composition length and overall quality. The results indicated that the posttest essays in the advanced strategy instruction group contained more words but were determined to be of lower quality compared to the standard instruction of process writing that were shorter in length but were stronger in quality. The treatment group results,  $t(18)=2.11$ ,  $p=.05$ , favored the intervention group (Troia & Graham, 2003).

The ability to generalize from this study to regular education is unknown but the researchers concluded that interventions may be prohibitive with a full classroom of students. The study demonstrated that students with learning disabilities can be supported with explicit writing instruction to improve writing performance. Helping students to plan, organize, and brainstorm ideas before writing aligns with past research reviews which indicate students with learning disabilities struggle with the planning stage. This study researched the strategies that were most productive (Troia & Graham, 2003).

Schneider (1997) wrote *Undoing "The" Writing Process: Supporting the Idiosyncratic Writing Strategies of Children* and presented her findings at the 1997 IRA Conference. The case study included one classroom teacher and five students, chosen to represent the total class makeup, including two above-average, two below-average, and two average writers. The

qualitative study, including observations and interviews, lasted one school year. The case studies were examined for patterns of writing instruction and writing practice. Different contexts for writing emerged as distinct from writing within the content areas to journal writing. The study included many items but one particular finding pertinent to the research was the idea that students were more interested in pleasing their teacher than holding ownership of the writing as their own. The processes of writing were questioned to be artificial for most children and were rarely internalized. Schneider reminded the reader that students are not just beginning writers, they are whole children with thoughts and experiences to successfully compose a written piece. Just as importantly, the teacher directly impacts the children's writing while it is occurring (Schneider, 1997). Vygotsky (1978) argued that a plan was helpful but planning before writing could be merely in thoughts, without a written plan. The importance of this particular study revealed that the teacher was flexible as students wrote, allowing each to write to their potential without a rigid standard of minimums or elaborate rules, albeit without the ability to generalize the demands.

Scardamalia, Bereiter, and Goelman (1982) researched the effects of prompting children to encourage students to continue writing when they had exhausted their ideas. The first promptings were not based on the content of the writing; instead they were generic phrases of support to encourage students to try to write more and to include more detail. When generic prompts were not helping the students to write productively, the researchers shifted to content-related prompts such as, "That seems like a funny story," or "I also love the zoo," making a comment directly related to the student's paper. Once again, this support to encourage a student to keep writing seemed to improve writing length.

Goldstein and Carr (1996) studied the 1992 National Assessment of Educational Progress for 7000 fourth graders, 11,000 eighth graders and 11,500 twelfth graders across the

United States. The study compared students who received no encouragement to use prewriting techniques to students who did receive encouragement for prewriting strategies. The results indicated that prewriting increased average proficiency. Fourth graders who were not prompted to use prewriting strategies scored an average of 221 compared to an average of 230 for students who demonstrated evidence of using prewriting strategies. Eighth graders with no prewriting strategies averaged 258 compared to students with evidence of prewriting. The twelfth grade students scored 278 when no prewriting strategies were employed, compared to 295 with evidence of prewriting strategies. The researchers concluded that specific writing instruction that included prewriting strategies significantly contributed to higher average writing scores.

Gibson (2008) demonstrated through graphs and tables how prompting need not be from a teacher every time, but could come instead from a list of general questions to spark ideas that can be converted to the child's writing. Prompting such as, "Think of a good first sentence," or "Tell me more about your idea," can self-guide a student to writing more with details and supporting ideas (Gibson, 2008, p. 328). Although frequently much of the writing process does not come across on the written page, the process can be difficult. Nevertheless, teachers make efforts to support writers to overcome difficulties and continue on with the writing (Gibson, 2008). This prompting is frequently spent in the initial phases of the writing process as new ideas and thoughts are put onto paper. The internal prompting of a young writer could have an effect on the production of new ideas and thoughts of "What's next?" in terms of writing.

Farnan and Dahl (2003) expanded on the idea of internal prompting and described the process as a knowledge transforming model. This interaction is one of problem solving, as the writer continues to think a step ahead of the writing so as to weave new ideas into the current

writing. Students simply stop writing when they run out of ideas, no matter how much time they are afforded to write (Farnan & Dahl, 2003). This internal prompting could be supplemented with explicit instruction and the training to use prompting ideas that encourage writers to continue.

In describing guided writing, Gibson (2008) detailed the process of interaction necessary between the teacher and the writer. As an individual student is writing the teacher can respond in the moment to encourage more writing (Gibson, 2008). This interaction and prompting allows the teacher to use feedback to encourage an expansion of previous ideas that may lead to new thoughts and ideas for writing. This interaction is not explicit instruction, but rather a prompting that guides a writer to write more and that demonstrates how the process ensues. Prompting could also happen during the conferencing stage of the writing process. At that time, a teacher could prompt for more details or additional ideas. The discussion between teacher and student frequently can occur during the first draft of a written piece or during the conferencing phase. Frequent and quality instruction can help to move students' writing from simple to complex (Gibson, 2008). Language and ideas can be improved and expanded upon by a consistent use of prompting and feedback. In contrast, Routman countered that as a teacher corrects written pieces from a student, this type of interaction does little or nothing to improve student writing performance in the final draft stage (Routman, 2005).

Literacy development and achievement among school-aged children is a major concern among parents, educators, and stakeholders in the United States where rates of growth in reading, writing and language progression are below peers in other developed nations. The emergence of the technological era has ushered in new social and material contexts for human communication that have changed the reality of what previously may have been regarded as "basic" skills. Writing proficiency is a tool for learning and is critical to school success



throughout the grades and beyond; however, many students experience difficulty with learning to write, and classroom teachers struggle to find ways to elicit effective production, including the ongoing issue of how best to allocate instructional time.

Teaching writing is a complex process requiring considerable periods of instructional time, coupled with extensive student practice, feedback, revision, and more practice. Varying instructional methods and techniques are needed to elicit effective production considering the differing instructional contexts that exist in schools and the individual differences in grade school children including youngsters with special needs.

States and various school districts in some states are now beginning to include writing scores in annual compliance measures, that heretofore have focused solely on math and reading. Consequently, teachers will now need to pay more attention to the quality of student writing and reevaluate teaching methodologies. No doubt, there will be increased interest in incorporating techniques that will elicit effective writing proficiency and performance to meet compliance standards.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODS**

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the research methods of the study, including the design, population and sample, subject selection, instruments, procedures and data analysis. The purpose of this investigation was to determine the effects of selected teacher-prompting techniques on student writing performance. Given the consecutive conditions of no prompting, general prompting and content-specific prompting, were there significant changes in the number of words, number of sentences, and average sentence length generated in the writing samples among fourth and fifth graders? A corollary to the investigation was to relate student writing performance and readability levels as determined by Flesch Kincaid Readability estimates. Simply because a student is composing more words and sentences, has the difficulty level of the writing improved or is the number of words and sentences an unrelated factor to the reading-level difficulty of the written composition? A final purpose was to learn the relationship between text difficulty and whether prompting increased the written complexity of the students' writing. Does prompting at the beginning of the writing process encourage a greater level of text difficulty and reading ease?

#### **Design**

The investigation was a quantitative research investigation, with a 3 x 2 x 2 factorial design, with repeated measures outcomes. The major independent variable was teacher prompting and its three prompting factors: none, general and specific. Prompting techniques were further distinguished by fourth and fifth grade levels across two elementary schools. The dependent variables were measured effects on word frequency, sentence frequency and sentence length production. Additionally, reading difficulty and reading ease levels per prompting techniques were measured.

## **Population and Sample**

The population was 137 fourth and fifth graders attending two parochial schools in West Virginia. The groupings in school “A” consisted of 19 fourth graders and 16 fifth graders, and those in school “B” contained 60 fourth graders and 57 fifth graders in four classes. The subjects ranged in age between 9 and 12 years and the sex distribution was 48% girls and 52% boys. The reported ethnicity of the students was 91% Caucasian, 6 % East Indian, 1% African American and 2% other. The proportion of students who receive free or reduced meals at school “A” was 12% compared to 7 % at school “B.” Four teachers were involved with an average of 22 years of teaching experience. The nonrandom, purposeful selection of the four intact classrooms were selected for the study resulting in a nonrandom, as the entities for the prompting interventions.

## **PROCEDURES**

### **Diocese/School Administrator/Teacher Permission**

The co-investigator contacted the Catholic Diocese curriculum administrator, the school administrators, and all teachers formally in writing, requesting permissions to conduct the prompting writing program (Appendix A and B). The letter included an overview of the study, potential benefits to the students, and the potential use of the results to improve and benefit the overall writing program. The letter described that this study was not an experiment, but rather an additional curriculum-based activity that could ordinarily be part of an instructional program in the writing curriculum. The intervention included all students, and the goal was to improve their writing production and accomplishments. Additionally, the intervention might assist teachers and administrators to provide a more effective writing program to help students to excel in daily writing and writing assessments. (See Appendix C for the form used in

requesting the schools' participation.)

### **Teacher Overview, Orientation and Training for Student Prompts**

Four teachers who were involved in administering the writing lessons participated in a one-day training session that took place before the school year began (Appendix F)]. The teachers were provided with all paperwork, templates, pencils, and teacher scripts. Initially, teachers were given an overview of the total project. This overview included a modified time line and scoring points to be used throughout the study to see where each writing sample fit into the whole. Included in this overview was an example of student writing at each scoring point. Each writing sample was collected in the morning over several weeks. Teachers also completed a survey that included specific demographic questions related to their teaching background and experience (Appendix D). Topics included the amount and type of professional development completed over the past three years in writing instruction. Next, the teachers were given a developmentally-appropriate script that stated exact language to use in the writing administration. The script included specific directions on how to introduce the writing and what type of comments were acceptable (Appendix E). The prompting phrasing was explicit and direct. For example, one script read as follows:

Today we are going to write on a given topic. I will write the topic on the board and it is also shown on your paper. You have 20 minutes to write. During this time, you will need to write independently. You may not ask for my help or you cannot talk with a classmate. Please use the pencils provided. Do you have any questions?

After this, the teacher passed out pre-labeled templates of writing forms to students. The topic was written on the board and read aloud. See Appendix C for complete detailed instructions

and an example of a template. Finally, the Student Writing Template (Appendix G) and pencils were provided. At the top of each template, each student's pre-assigned number (Appendix H) and other information was listed. The writing topic for that day was preprinted on the student template. The teacher was instructed to have students point to the topic while the teacher read the prompt.

## **PROMPTING CONDITIONS**

### **No Prompting**

The first writing sample that was collected occurred with no intervention. The students were not prompted by the teacher in a special manner, but they were still directed by the teacher with specific instructions. The teacher allowed the students 20 minutes of uninterrupted writing time. Even though the prompt was printed on the student template, the teacher also read it aloud. During this time, the teacher's instructions were not to encourage or conference with the students, thus allowing them to write freely without discussion or interference.

### **Generic Prompting**

In this intervention the classroom teachers were trained to offer aloud various kinds of non-content related comments to the entire class while the students were writing. These could include; phrases such as the following: "Five more minutes to write," "Keep writing," "Fill your page up," "Put down your best ideas," or "No talking, only writing." The researcher had directed the teacher to monitor his or her comments that were given in each session throughout this condition to regulate the teacher's involvement with the class.

### **Content Related Prompting**

In this condition, teachers were instructed to make content-related comments to each

child during the writing period. For example, the writing topic, “Where would you go, if you could go anywhere?” could solicit prompting from the teacher such as follows: “Your trip to Columbus sounds interesting,” “Wow, I have never been to Florida before,” or “Lake Tahoe does sound like a fun vacation for skiing.” The comments were topic- and student-specific. The teachers were again asked to list five comments that were made during the session. The objective was that each student would receive one or more comments to encourage more writing about his or her composition as it was being written. Following is an excerpt of what the teachers said to the students:

Today we are going to write on a given topic. I will write the topic on the board and it is also shown on your paper. You have 20 minutes to write. During this time, you will need to write independently. You may not ask for my help, or you cannot talk with a classmate. Please use the pencils provided. Do you have any questions? [Pass out pre-labeled templates of writing form to students and write the writing topic on board and read aloud.] Please read the topic on your paper as I read the topic with you. Remember, you have 20 minutes to write and you will begin when I say “begin.” Are there any questions? Begin writing. [With this new treatment – you are to make specific content related comments to the students to encourage writing.]

### **Writing Collection**

At the conclusion of each writing session, student templates were collected and placed in an envelope for each day of intervention with the name of the class, school, grade and prompting condition clearly identified.

## **INSTRUMENTS**

The data collection and instruments used in this research were comprised of two phases. The first collection phase utilized the collection of data with a protocol that indicated the frequency of words, sentences and average sentence length. The second collection phase focused on the ease and difficulty of writing levels using Flesch Kincaid Readability level and Flesch Reading Ease level.

The Flesch Kincaid Readability level was calculated using the Readability index calculator from (Readability Formula, nd). This calculator provided an estimate of the approximate age of a student that could read that text. The exact formula is  $(0.39 \times \text{Average Sentence Length}) + (11.8 \times \text{Average Syllables per Word}) - 15.59$ , (Readability Formula, nd). The Flesch Reading Ease Level demonstrates the ease of reading a particular text. The Reading Ease scores range from 0-100, with 0 being the easiest to read and 100 being the most difficult. The Reading Ease formula is  $206.835 - (1.015 \times \text{Average Sentence Length}) - 84.6 \times \text{Average Syllables per Word}$  (Readability Formula, nd). The approximate Flesch Reading Ease for a fourth or fifth grader is 60-80.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

The co-investigator analyzed the data by applying several kinds of descriptive and inferential statistical techniques, including frequency distributions; mean, median and summated scores; Chi Square Tests of Independence, Friedman Tests and Analyses of Variance. When applicable, related “effect size” measures was conducted. Each type of analysis is noted below.

Descriptive analyses pointed to characteristics of the data, including expected and unexpected patterns, clustering and variance, distributions in sample sizes (gender, grade level and schools), numbers of valid cases, and summary statistics for score distributions.

The Chi Square Test of Independence was applied to determine if the proportions in the various distributions were either independent of one another (vary or differ significantly) or dependent or equitable (do not vary or differ significantly). In effect this analysis indicated the likelihoods of word production to be greater (or lesser) as a result of the interventions. A  $p$  level of  $\leq .05$  was set beforehand to test for significance. When significance occurred, a related-effect size measure was obtained using Cramer's  $V$ . to determine the magnitude of the significance.

The Friedman Test was applied to the same data in each case, as previously noted, for the frequencies across the promptings; this test resulted in a "repeated measures" effect. Essentially, it produced outcomes similar to Chi Square, with the exceptions that the effect-size measure was a more conservative estimate. A  $p$  level of  $\leq .05$  was set beforehand to test for significance.

The Analysis of Variance determined if significant differences occurred in the means scores for average sentence lengths across the three prompting conditions. A  $p$  level of  $\leq .05$  was set beforehand to test for significance.

In each case, associated tabled and graphic output was generated to visualize and support the interpretation of the numerical data.



## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **RESULTS AND FINDINGS**

Chapter four is organized into the following sections of data collection, demographics, major findings for each of the five research questions, ancillary findings and a summary. The primary purpose of this study was to examine the effects of teacher prompting techniques on the writing performance of fourth and fifth graders. The consecutive conditions of no prompting, general prompting, and content specific prompting were analyzed regarding these effects on student writing. The analysis looked for significant changes in the number of words, number of sentences, and average sentence length. A corollary to the investigation was to relate student writing performance and the readability levels of writing samples as determined by Flesch Kincaid Readability measures. This study answered the question of whether text difficulty and kinds of prompting increased the written complexity of the students' writing.

#### **Data Collection, Analysis and Results**

The data for this study was collected inside the classrooms of fourth and fifth grade students in two, private elementary schools in Charleston, West Virginia; School *A* and School *B*. The data consisted of 405 writing samples, three samples each from 137 students. However, seven participants did not complete all three writing typologies. Thus, their data were not included in the final analyses. Data collection took place between March, 2014, and April, 2014.

Teachers administered a student writing template with preprinted developmentally appropriate scripts (topics) along with directions about how and what to write. These writing samples were analyzed in regard to the number of words, number of sentences and average

sentence length, as well as for and the writing ease and writing complexity levels based on Flesch Kincaid (Readability Formula, nd) and Flesch Reading Ease (Readability Formula, nd) techniques. A combination of descriptive and inferential data-analysis techniques were used to determine the results of these outcomes as may have been distinguished by the three teacher-prompting methods (no, general, and content specific).

Table 1: *Teachers' Demographic and Academic Characteristics*

School/Levels	Grade	Yrs. at Level	Total Yrs.	Degree	Professional Development
2.4. 1	fourth	6	24	B.A	Creative Writing & 4 Square
2.5.1	fifth	.50	.50	B.A	None
1.4.1	fourth	6	12	B.A	Creative Writing
1.4.2	fourth	5	17	B.A	Creative Writing
1.5.1	fifth	20	47	B.A	Creative Writing

The participating teachers (n=5) had completed a bachelor's degree and most had received additional professional development training in creative writing. Teaching experience ranged from one half year to 47 years of experience. Forty percent of the teachers possessed more than 20 years of teaching experience. The median of teaching experience was 20 years, and the average of teaching at the current grade level was 7.2 years as seen in Table 1. The participating students (n=137) ranged in age from 8 to 11 years, and all were in the fourth and fifth grades. Free and reduced lunch allocations were reported at 7% at School A and 12% at School B.

## **Population and Sample**

The population was 137 fourth and fifth graders attending two parochial schools in West Virginia. The groupings in school *A* consisted of 19 fourth graders and 16 fifth graders in two classes, and those in school *B* included 60 fourth graders and 57 fifth graders in five classes. The subjects ranged in age between 9 and 12 years, and the sex distribution was 48% girls and 52% boys. The reported ethnicity of the students was 91% Caucasian, 6 % East Indian, 1% African American, and 2% other. The proportion of students who received free or reduced meals at school *A* was 12% compared to 7 % at school *B*. The five teachers involved in the study possessed an average of 22 years of teaching experience. Because intact classrooms were selected for the study, the sample was a nonrandom, purposeful selection of the four classrooms as the entities for the prompting interventions.

Prior to data collection and analysis, teachers estimated an assessment of student's existing language and writing skills teachers to test for homogeneity of variance between the school samples. Classroom teachers estimated the students' level of language and writing using a writing rubric numerically keyed to a four-point Likert assessment. Because of the difference in samples sizes between the two schools, the results were reported and interpreted proportionally to each school's total number of written prompts. These results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: *Cross Tabulation of Schools and Student Pretest Language Scores*

	PRETEST LANGUAGE SCORES				Total
	NEEDS IMPROVEMENT	PARTIAL MASTERY	MASTERY	ABOVE MASTERY	
SCHOOL A	15	64	164	56	299
SCHOOL B	12	46	45	3	106
Total	27	110	209	59	405

Results showed that 73 % of the writing samples from School A were estimated at *Mastery or Above Mastery* compared to 46 % at the same levels for students in School B. Conversely, School A students had 27 % estimated at “Needs Improvement” or “Partial Mastery, compared to 54 % for those in School B. A major difference occurred for “Above Mastery” ratings with less than 3 % for School A youngsters compared to 19% for their peers at School B.

Table 3 reports the Chi-Square Test of significance for estimated language scores which yielded a significant difference ( $p .000$ ) for estimated language scores between participants in the two schools. In effect, participants in School A had an estimated lower level of estimated language skill that could potentially skew the data analysis of the study due to a lack of homogeneity of variance. However, as noted, this estimated lower level was not the case; no differences in writing production were associated with these differences.

Table 3: *Chi-Square Test of Significance for Language Scores by Schools*

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	34.509 <sup>a</sup>	3	.000
Likelihood Ratio	37.546	3	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	32.278	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	405		

0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 7.07.

## Research Questions and Major Findings

Major findings from this section include data analysis and results presented in the framework of the four research questions that were posed to determine the effects of various types of teacher prompting and the effect of reading ease and text complexity. Quantifying tables follow each question along with a narrative analysis and summary of results.

**Research Question #1.** Does the type of teacher prompting condition, i.e., no prompting, general prompting and content specific prompting, make a significant difference in the total number of words written by students? These results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: *Descriptive Data for Prompting and Word and Sentence Production*

TYPES OF PROMPTING		AVERAGE SENTENCE LENGTH (WORDS)	TOTAL NUMBER OF WORDS	TOTAL NUMBER OF SENTENCES
NONE	Mean	14.953	161.51	12.51
	N	133	135	136
	Std. Deviation	9.5679	69.739	6.573
	Mean	16.083	165.76	12.83
GENERAL	N	134	136	136
	Std. Deviation	15.0504	59.496	6.473

CONTENT SPECIFIC	Mean	16.156	153.32	12.68
	<i>N</i>	129	133	133
	Std. Deviation	11.9932	69.890	13.745
Total	Mean	15.727	160.25	12.67
	<i>N</i>	396	404	405
	Std. Deviation	12.4007	66.554	9.497

The mean difference for the total number of words between the prompting conditions and was approximately 8 score points. Word count for content specific prompting (153.32) and general prompting (165.8) varied considerably, and somewhat greater (161.5) from general prompting. Interestingly, the lowest word production occurred for content specific prompting. Overall, the total number of words written was 160.3. This figure represented a large range within the category with a minimum of 23 words and a maximum of 385 words written.

To test these outcomes inferentially, a one-way analysis of variance was obtained. These results showed no statistical significance between the types of prompting and word production ( $F(2, 136) = 2.64, p = .073$ ).

**Research Question #2.** Does the type of teacher prompting condition, i.e., no prompting, general prompting and content specific prompting, make a significant difference in the total number of sentences written by the participants? Descriptive data are also shown in Table 4.

The mean scores for each of the prompting conditions were nearly identical (12.51, 12.83, and 12.68). In each case the average number of sentences written was not affected by the types of prompting. Interestingly, the variability for none and general prompting was very similar (6.5, and 6.6), yet the variability doubled for content specific prompting (13.8), with a

minimum of 1 sentence to a maximum of 126. In this case, content specific prompting may have induced a broader range of ideas to write about while not necessarily increasing the number of sentences.

Because the average sentence lengths were nearly identical, no inferential tests of significance were obtained since it was extremely unlikely that significant differences would be found among the types of prompting for number of sentences produced.

**Research Question #3.** Does the type of teacher prompting condition, i.e., *no prompting, general prompting and content specific prompting*, make a significant difference in the Flesch writing complexity scores of students?

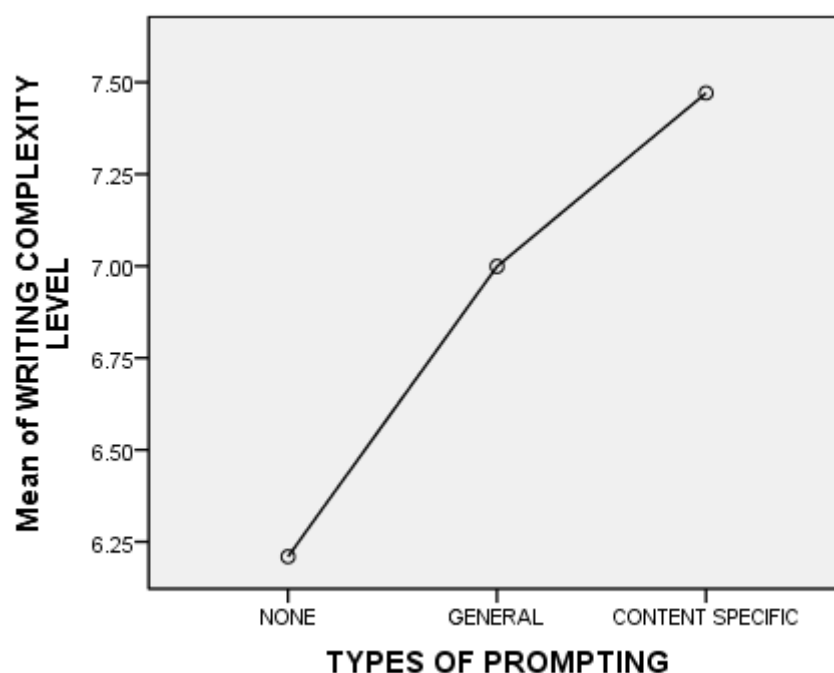
Flesch complexity writing scores measure an estimated grade level for a given written product. This information was obtained to further measure student writing skills and production as well as to determine a level of homogeneity among the students in the two schools. These scores are reported as grade level equivalents. Descriptive data for these outcomes are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5: *Flesch Writing Complexity Scores Across the Types of Prompting*

Descriptives								
Writing Complexity Level								
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Mini mum	Maxi mum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
NONE	136	6.210	8.2981	0.7116	4.802	7.617	0.7	70.0
GENERAL	136	6.999	11.4692	0.9835	5.054	8.944	1.6	108.9
CONTENT SPECIFIC	133	7.471	14.8086	1.2841	4.931	10.011	0.3	148.9
Total	405	6.889	11.7850	0.5856	5.738	8.040	0.3	148.9

These data showed a grade-equivalent score respectively of 6.20, 6.99 and 7.48 for each type of prompting technique. In effect, there was a trend difference between the prompting types with a mean complexity score of 6.21 for no prompting, which indicated that the students were writing above a sixth grade level on average in this condition. While completing the writing prompt with general feedback, the students writing complexity score increased to 6.99 indicating that the students were writing at approximately the seventh grade level. Similarly for content specific prompting, the mean writing complexity score further increased to 7.47, a score that is approximately the middle of seventh grade. Figure 1 depicts the trend of writing complexity scores across the types of prompting. This trend is the only evidence within the study that showed a differential outcome progressively through the three teacher-prompting conditions.

Figure 1: *Trend of Writing Complexity Scores for Types of Prompting*





**Research Question #4.** Does the type of teacher prompting condition, i.e., no prompting, general prompting and content specific prompting, make a significant difference in the Flesch Kincaid Reading Ease scores of students' writing production?

Flesch Kincaid Ease scores indicate how easily one may read a sample written passage, measured on a scale between 0 and 100 points. The lower the score, the more complex the reading sample is to understand. Scores between 60- and 70 are generally regarded as a desirable readability level. Table 6 summarizes the mean reading ease scores for participants across the three types of teacher prompting.

Table 6: *Descriptives for Flesch Reading Ease Scores Across the Types of Prompting*

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Mini- mum	Maxi- mum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
NONE	136	82.406	15.3311	1.3146	79.806	85.006	.0	100.0
GENERAL	136	80.496	17.2200	1.4766	77.576	83.417	.0	97.7
CONTENT SPECIFIC	133	81.883	18.1037	1.5698	78.778	84.988	.0	100.0
Total	405	81.593	16.8929	.8394	79.943	83.243	.0	100.0

Participants averaged 80+ with similar variability and no obvious differences in regard to the types of prompting. In this case, participants writing samples would be considered as moderately easy to read, which indicates that lesser complex language was incorporated into their writing samples. No tests of significance were obtained for these data given the minimal differences noted between the mean scores and standard deviations for the types of teacher prompting.

## SUMMARY

In summary, the results showed no significant differences in children's written word and sentence productions across the types of teacher writing prompts, notwithstanding the fact that the subjects in School *B* had significantly greater teacher estimates of writing skills compared to those in School *A* prior to the investigation. Likewise, no significant differences were noted in writing production across the types of prompting between the two schools, despite the demographic that 12 % of the student population at School *A* received free or reduced meal assistance compared to 7 % at School *B*.

Additionally, the type of writing prompts did not significantly affect Flesch writing complexity scores; however, a trend occurred which showed that writing complexity scores (grade-level equivalents) increased respectively as students progressed from no prompting to specific content prompting types of writing. In effect, these results indicated that students were writing at grade-level equivalents between 6.0 and 7.4, obviously beyond their existing grade levels. However, what proportion of the effect is attributed to those students in the fourth or fifth grade levels at the respective schools is not known. Conversely, Flesch Easy reading levels were not affected by the types of teacher prompting. These results (mean scores) indicated that the writing samples produced were at a moderate level of language complexity across the types of prompting. However, the study employed small sample sizes and a limited amount of text production, and these factors could have affected reliability estimates.

Overall the results indicated that types of prompting did not significantly affect the student's existing writing skills and production and that students were writing at a complexity level beyond their current grade levels. Interestingly, no effects on writing production were distinguished by the apparent socio-economic differences among the students in the two

schools, nor associated with the differential language backgrounds, as estimated by their teachers. Overall, students were uniform in their writing production, and the results have presented an argument about the type of writing prompt being an important variable in writing research investigations.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **CONCLUSIONS, INTERPRETATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **Summary of Purpose**

The first major purpose of this study was to determine the effects of selected teacher prompting techniques on fourth and fifth grade students writing performance in two private elementary schools. The selected teacher prompting typologies consisted of no prompting, general prompting and content specific prompting. Inherent in these techniques were the belief and expectation that student writing production would be differentially affected by the variations in teacher control and guidance during the prompting process.

A second major purpose was to determine if a relationship existed between student writing performance and readability levels on the composition as determined by the Flesch Kincaid Readability and Flesch Reading Ease assessments. The focus here was to understand whether student writing samples were completed with a level of language complexity at or greater than their current grade levels.

The importance of enhancing writing achievement and literacy development among school-aged children is a major concern among parents, educators and stakeholders in the United States where rates of growth in reading, writing and language progression are estimated to be below peers in other developed nations. Some states, including West Virginia, are now beginning to include writing scores in annual compliance measures, that heretofore have focused solely on math and reading. Consequently, teachers will now need to pay more

attention to the quality of student writing and to reevaluate their teaching methodologies.

Undoubtedly, interest will increase in techniques that will elicit effective writing proficiency and performance for meeting compliance standards.

### **Summary of Demographics**

The participants were 137 fourth and fifth graders attending two urban parochial schools in West Virginia. All students participated in the study because the writing samples were composed and used as part of the regular writing instructional time resulting in 405 writing samples. The groupings in school *A* consisted of 19 fourth graders and 16 fifth graders and in school *B* there were 43 fourth graders and 58 fifth graders. The subjects ranged in age between 8 and 12 years, and the sex distribution was 48% girls and 52% boys. The reported ethnicity of the students was 91% Caucasian, 6 % East Indian, 1% African American and 2% other. The proportion of students who received free or reduced meals at school *A* is 12% compared to 7% at school *B*. Given the differences in meal assistance there was a concern that the socio-economics of students between the two schools varied such that it could impact (skew) the outcome measures in the study.

The five teachers involved in the study possessed an average of 22 years of teaching experience. Four of the 5 teachers had completed professional development in creative writing, and the same number had taught approximately half of their teaching career in the currently-assigned grade levels.

## Summary of Design

The study was a within-subjects, split-plot design split by fourth and fifth grade levels, including all 137 students. Because intact classrooms were selected, it was a nonrandom, purposeful selection of a population. The independent variable was the type of teacher prompting and its three factors. There were two kinds of dependent variables (measures): (a) word and sentence production and (b) reading ease and writing-complexity levels. Additionally, participants were measured beforehand on their existing language skills to assure a level of homogeneity between the subjects in the two schools. These measures are noted in Table 7. In effect the design was a 2x2x3 factorial.

Table 7: *Dependent Measures for Design*

Total	Total	Average	Flesch Reading	Flesch Writing	Pretest
Number of	Number of	Sentence	Ease	Complexity	Language
Words	Sentences	Length (Words)	Levels	Scores	Scores

## Summary of Data Analysis

A combination of descriptive and inferential techniques was applied to analyze the data, including mean scores and standard deviations, Chi-square analyses, paired samples t-tests and analyses of variance. When applicable, related “effect size” measures were conducted. A  $p$  level of  $\leq .05$  was set beforehand to test for significance. Data analyses were obtained

using the Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version, 22. These analyses were applied appropriately to address each of the research questions posed for the investigation.

## **Research Questions and-Related Findings and Conclusions**

### **Research Question 1**

Does the type of teacher delivered prompting condition, no prompting, general prompting and content specific prompting, make a significant difference in the total number of words written by student in a writing assessment?

Although previous studies have shown that teacher prompting techniques can assist and even increase children's responsiveness to general classroom-teaching goals and social and behavioral compliance, this finding was not the case for writing achievement with the current sample. The mean difference between the prompting conditions demonstrated no significance for the total number of words. With no prompting from the teacher, the average total number of words was 165.76. When the teacher made general prompting statements, the students' average total number of words was 153.32. During the content specific prompting, the students' averaged a total number of 160.25 words. The number of words did not improve with general or content specific prompting. The reason for this finding is not evident. While the teacher was giving specific content related comments, perhaps the students felt like their writing was being critiqued or evaluated prematurely. Also, Plakans (2008) has questioned the

components of writing prompts and whether students gain a better understanding of the prompts when they are required to read a passage and then apply the information into the writing assignment rather than just reading a brief writing stimulus and then writing to the prompt.

In 1968 James Moffet created a writing experience curriculum that focused on students writing together (Moffett & Wagner, 1992). Perhaps the study results would have been different if the content specific comments were from a peer rather than the teacher. Research does suggest that teaching specific strategies such as word counting or creating a synonym list does improve the word count and the variety of words used (Geisler, et al., 2009). Condon (2004) defined a new type of writing prompt that had students write an essay based on a generative writing prompt that is constructed so that writers could express their experiences in their written responses. No data were given in this study to support differences.

## **Research Question 2**

Does the type of teacher delivered prompting condition, no prompting, general prompting and content specific prompting, make a significant difference in the total number of sentences written by students in a writing assessment?

The mean for total number of sentences with no prompting was 12.51. During the general prompting phase, the students wrote an average of 12.83 and for the final writing phase that consisted of content specific prompting, the students wrote an average of 12.68 sentences.



There were no significant differences among the types of prompting for number of sentences.

Of the 405 writing samples collected, 13 students had written only one sentence, yet while the most common number was nine sentences. The students need quality writing instruction that is scaffolded to support them throughout the writing process and then slowly removed as they gain confidence writing independently (Englert, 1992).

It may be that the participants who had not been exposed to writing prompts previously needed prior opportunities to write with prompts -- highlight the process and its key aspects, coupled with positive feedback about how they used the prompts to write and what adjustments might be needed. In addition, greater teacher training about how to mediate the process across the prompts may be needed. Finally, more consistent classroom writing instruction or more content directed prompting could help students to improve their writing production (Pressley, et.al, 2007).

The topics related to the prompting typologies employed in the study were content-free or self-explanatory and may have been perceived as superficial to the students' experiences. If so, this perception could have affected their motivation to think in-depth about the topic and to induce effective production. Additionally, extensive periods of prompting could be perceived as "labor laden" and thus demoting interest and motivation for the student, i.e., a loss of stimulus value (Hidi & Boscolo, 2006; Olinghouse, Zheng, & Morlock, 2012).

### **Research Question 3**

Does the type of teacher delivered prompting condition, i.e., no prompting, general prompting and content specific prompting, make a significant difference in the complexity of student writing in a writing assessment?

Of interest here was to know if the reading complexity level of the children's writing was related to prompting typology and if the children's writing samples were consistent with grade-level equivalents from the Flesch Kincaid Readability scale. Although the writing complexity of student work showed no significant differences between the different types of prompting, a trend difference emerged between the prompting types. The mean for no prompting complexity was 6.21, indicating that the students were writing above a sixth grade level on average. While completing the writing prompt with general feedback, the students writing complexity increased to 6.99, an indication that the students were writing at approximately at the seventh grade level. With content specific prompting, the mean writing complexity further increased to 7.47, approximately the middle of seventh grade. This trend was the only evidence within the study that showed a differential outcome progressively through the three teacher prompting conditions. Comprehension is improved through writing; therefore a higher complexity score could improve comprehension (Knipper & Duggan, 2008).

### **Research Question 4**

Does the type of teacher delivered prompting condition, no prompting, general prompting and content specific prompting, make a significant difference in the Flesch Kincaid

reading ease scores of students writing in a writing assessment? Of interest here was to know if the overall readability levels of the children's writing samples were within a "normal" range. Flesch-Kincaid Reading Ease scores between 60- and 70 are generally regarded as a desirable readability level. The results showed no significant differences among the types of prompting as far as Flesch Reading Ease levels. Participants averaged between 80.4 and 82.4 with similar variability and no obvious differences in regard to the types of prompting. In this case, participants writing samples would be considered as moderately easy to read, a finding that indicates that lesser complex language was incorporated into their writing samples. This result was somewhat surprising and contradictory because of the associated reading-complexity grade-level equivalents found between 6.21 and 7.47. No tests of significance were obtained for these data given the minimal differences noted between the mean scores and standard deviations for the types of teacher prompting.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

A number of further research opportunities emerged from this study and its conclusions regarding the effect of teacher prompting techniques on students writing performance.

1. While this research did not show significant improvement in the writing performance of the students, it remains unknown if other kinds of prompting techniques or greater frequency of prompt writing would improve the students' writing performance.
2. The current study did not examine different types of professional development on writing strategies to examine if there is a link between more professional development and

improved writing performance.

3. The issue with personalized writing topics could be considered. Would the students writing performance improve if the writing topic was determined by self- selection?
4. Classroom teachers administered the writing prompts within the Reading/Language Arts time period. The teachers did receive modest training, but would additional training detailing how to orient the students and how to mediate the process across the prompts result in greater student achievement?
5. Many, if not most, practitioners have entered the teaching ranks with minimal preservice preparation in writing instruction. The average writing requirement in teacher education preparation programs consists of one course that is tightly embedded within the total language arts program (West Virginia Department of Education, 2011). Consequently, very little emphasis is given to writing instruction in this course, and the majority of teachers report that their professional education courses have left them less than prepared to teach writing (Gilbert & Graham, 2010). An extensive study of the background preparation in language and writing among preservice teacher education candidates at the elementary levels could determine how best to prepare future teachers to enhance and assess students' writing abilities early on. One possibility, for example, is training teachers in implementing classroom assessment practices using analytic writing traits associated with automated scoring programs.
6. The current study did not examine differences between public-school students and private-school students to determine if prompting techniques would be differentially affected in these contexts.
7. This study did examine effects of prompting comparing high-level and low-level readers however, the differences between boys and girls was not examined.

## **SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS**

Although the current study found no effects on writing production for the prompting typologies employed, there are many other kinds of prompting techniques, including graphic, pictorial, metacognitive, video and gestural that have promise for helping students to write more effectively. Researchers must continue to search and to test for effective methods germane to their student populations and characteristics. Individual differences undoubtedly abound among the writing skills of students, and no one “prompt” or method will fit all. Also, as one scans the literature review in this study and in other sources, it is apparent that there are minimal data-driven research studies attesting to the effects on writing instruction.

An interesting result of the study was that the writing complexity of the student passages was estimated to be several grade-level equivalents beyond the participant’s current grade levels (fourth and fifth). Even though word and sentence production did not significantly differ across the prompting typologies, it did not mean that students lacked sufficient writing skills. However, there was not a corresponding finding for reading ease scores, i.e., how “easy” (or how difficult) it was to read the sample writing passages by another reader. These scores, as noted, varied in the low 80s (on a scale from 1 to 100) with scores between 60-70 are generally regarded as “normal”. In other words, this finding seemed to be contradictory.

Stakeholders need to be acutely aware of the importance and urgency of professional development for classroom teachers. The assumption cannot be made that because teachers who have extensive classroom teaching experience that they are also well versed in instructional

methods for teaching and assessing writing development, particularly with technical and online writing tools. Also, it is a fallacy to assume that the majority of beginning teachers have entered the profession with adequate instructional methodologies obtained in their preservice preparation programs.

Looking to the immediate future, in the past 20 years or so there has been an emergence of automated essay programs (AES) on the market. Increasingly, states and school districts are adopting AES programs to enhance and to assess student writing. Notwithstanding the criticisms and reservations about the use of these programs, AES can economically and quickly score thousands of student writing products and provide immediate results to students and teachers. Moreover, such programs are being incorporated into state-level, year-end, high stakes” standardized testing programs. As noted by Barbara Chow, Education Director of the William and Flora Foundation, “Rapid and accurate automated essay scoring programs will encourage states to include more writing in their state assessments” (Fischer, 2012, para. 3). To maintain a sense of confidence about the accuracy of such assessments, teachers and school districts should continue to research how human estimates of student writing accord with automated scoring. A blend of teacher estimates and periodic AES assessment may be an effective way to develop and enhance writing achievement.

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## APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH BOARD APPROVAL LETTER



**Office of Research Integrity**  
Institutional Review Board  
401 11th St., Suite 1300  
Huntington, WV 25701

FWA 00002704

IRB1  
#00002205  
IRB2  
#00003206

January 5, 2015

Samuel Securo, EdD  
Graduate School of Education and Professional Development

RE: IRBNet ID# 530768-2

At: Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral)

Dear Dr. Securo:

**Protocol Title:** [530768-2] Effects of Teacher Prompting Techniques on the Writing  
Performance of Fourth and Fifth  
Graders

**Expiration Date:** January 31, 2016

**Site Location:** MUGC

**Submission Type:** Continuing Review/Progress  
Report

APPROVED

**Review Type:** Exempt Review

The above study was approved for an additional 12 months by the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Designee. The approval will expire January 31, 2016. Since this approval is within 30 days of the expiration date, the fixed anniversary date of 01/31 was maintained. Continuing review materials should be submitted no later than 30 days prior to the expiration date.

This study is for student Mindy Allenger.

If you have any questions, please contact the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Coordinator Bruce Day, ThD, CIP at 304-696-4303 or [day50@marshall.edu](mailto:day50@marshall.edu). Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

## **APPENDIX B: DIOCESE LETTER**

Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston Department of Catholic Schools  
1322 Eoff Street, Wheeling,  
WV 26003

October 3, 2013

Dear Ms. Robyn Hammond,

As a former teacher at Sacred Heart Grade School, and now beginning a study to complete my doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction at Marshall University, I am writing to seek permission to work with the fourth and fifth grade teachers and students at Sacred Heart Grade School and Saint Agnes Grade School over a two week period. The purpose of my study is to determine the effects of selected teacher prompting techniques on student writing performance.

For the actual study, the teachers will collect three writing samples from students using friendly and grade-level appropriate writing topics. This activity is curriculum based and there are no unusual or disruptive aspects with these activities.

The study will gather information to help determine how teacher comments may affect student writing performance within the current writing curriculum. By analyzing the writing topics, word counts, sentence lengths and number of sentences written for a given sample, it may show what type of teacher comments best supports students while they write.

The results of the study will be aggregated, so no individual student data will be reported. All students and teachers will be given non-identifying numbers for complete anonymity. A short study description and Marshall University Office of Research Integrity approval letters are attached.

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns. ALSO, you may contact the doctoral committee chair, Dr. Sam Securro at (304-696-8948) or at securro@marshall.edu.

I look forward to the opportunity to work with your teachers and students.  
Mindy Allenger, Doctoral Candidate (304-696-2855) allenger1@marshall.edu

## APPENDIX C: PRINCIPAL CONSENT LETTER

Sacred Heart Catholic School  
1035 Quarrier Street East  
Charleston, WV 25301

October 30, 2013

Dear Principal Terri Maier,

As a former teacher at Sacred Heart Grade School, and now beginning a study to complete my doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction at Marshall University, I am writing to seek permission to work with the fourth and fifth grade teachers and students at Sacred Heart Grade School and Saint Agnes Grade School over a two week period. The purpose of the study is to determine the effects of selected teacher prompting techniques on student writing performance.

For the actual study, the teachers will collect three writing samples from students using friendly and grade-level appropriate writing topics. This activity is curriculum based and there are no unusual or disruptive aspects with these activities.

The study will gather information to help determine how teacher comments may affect student writing performance within the current writing curriculum. By analyzing the writing topics, word counts, sentence lengths and number of sentences written for a given sample, it may show what type of comments best supports students while in the act of writing.

The results of the study will be aggregated, so **no individual student data or school data will be reported**. All students and teachers will be given non-identifying numbers for complete anonymity. A short study description is attached. This study will be vetted through the Marshall University Office of Research Integrity and approval letters will be submitted to you

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns. Also, you may contact the doctoral committee chair, Dr. Samuel Securro at (304-696-8948) or at [securro@marshall.edu](mailto:securro@marshall.edu).

I look forward to the opportunity to work with your teachers and students.

Mindy Allenger, Doctoral Candidate (304-696-2855)

Marshall University College of Education and Professional Development

## APPENDIX D: PARTICIPATING TEACHER INFORMATION

### Participating Teacher Profile

Name : \_\_\_\_\_

School: \_\_\_\_\_

Currently Assigned Grade Level: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Years taught at Current Grade Level: \_\_\_\_\_

Total Numbers of Years taught at all levels: \_\_\_\_\_

Education: Highest Academic Degree/Training Completed (Check)

\_\_\_\_\_ Bachelors

\_\_\_\_\_ Masters

\_\_\_\_\_ Masters plus credits/hours

\_\_\_\_\_ Advanced Specialist

\_\_\_\_\_ Doctorate

What type of professional development have you completed that addressed how to teach writing?

\_\_\_\_\_ creative writing

\_\_\_\_\_ WV Writing project

\_\_\_\_\_ 4-square writing

\_\_\_\_\_ WV Writes

\_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX E: TEACHER SCRIPT FOR INTERVENTION**

### **Teacher Training Intervention**

The six teachers of the study will meet before school begins to go over study protocol. All materials will be provided: writing templates, pencils, envelopes to collect writing samples. Each student will be assigned a confidential number, not in alphabetical order, using The Student Information Sheet provided. The teacher will score the paper and remove tab with name so that no name will be associated with any writing sample.

### **Treatment #1 No Prompting**

“Today we are going to write on a given topic. I will write the topic on the board and it will also be on your paper. You have 20 minutes to write. During this time, you will need to write independently. You may not ask for my help or you cannot talk with a classmate. Please use the pencils provided. Do you have any questions?”

Pass out pre labeled templates of writing form to students and write writing topic on board and read aloud.

“Please read the topic on your paper as I read the topic with you. Remember, you have 20 minutes to write and you will begin when I say ‘begin.’ Are there any questions? Begin writing.”

Do not intervene or make any comments to students regarding what they write or how they write. Make no comments or facial gestures. Students write independently without intervention no discussion or interaction with peers. If students ask a question, remind them they need to complete the writing without any assistance. Collect writing sample, remove name tab and place in manila file labeled with correct Date, Intervention type, School, Grade. Give to study administrator.

## **Treatment #2 General Prompting**

“Today we are going to write on a given topic. I will write the topic on the board and it will also be on your paper. You have 20 minutes to write. During this time, you will need to write independently. You may not ask for my help or you cannot talk with a classmate. Please use the pencils provided. Do you have any questions?”

Pass out pre labeled templates of writing form to students and write writing topic on board and read aloud.

“Please read the topic on your paper as I read the topic with you. Remember, you have 20 minutes to write and you will begin when I say ‘begin.’ Are there any questions? Begin writing.”

With this new treatment – you are to make general comments to the students to encourage writing, but the comments must be general. See list below for approved comments.

“5 more minutes to write,”

“Keep writing,”

“Fill your page up,”

“Put down your best ideas,”

“No talking, only writing.”

Check off the list the number and which comments specifically were spoken. A minimum of five and a maximum of seven comments over the course of the twenty minute writing session will be monitored.

Students write independently without intervention no discussion or interaction with peers. If students ask a question, remind them they need to complete the writing without any assistance. Collect writing sample, remove name tab and place in manila file labeled with correct Date, Intervention type, School, Grade. Give to study administrator.



### **Treatment #3 Content Specific Prompting**

“Today we are going to write on a given topic. I will write the topic on the board and it will also be on your paper. You have 20 minutes to write. During this time, you will need to write independently. You may not ask for my help or you cannot talk with a classmate. Please use the pencils provided. Do you have any questions?”

Pass out pre labeled templates of writing form to students and write the writing topic on board and read aloud.

“Please read the topic on your paper as I read the topic with you. Remember, you have 20 minutes to write and you will begin when I say ‘begin.’ Are there any questions? Begin writing.”

With this new treatment – you are to make specific content related comments to the students to encourage writing. The list of acceptable comments are vague so that the actual content of the student’s writing guides the comments. You will again be asked to list five comments that were made during the session. The objective is that each student will receive one comment during this intervention.

Students write independently without intervention. No discussion or interaction with peers. If students ask a question, remind them they need to complete the writing without any assistance. Collect writing sample remove name tab and place in manila file labeled with correct Date, Intervention type, School, and Grade. Give to study administrator.

## **APPENDIX F: TEACHER TRAINING**

### **Teacher Training Intervention**

The four teachers of the study will meet before school begins to go over study protocol. All materials will be provided: writing templates, pencils, envelopes to collect writing samples. Each student will be assigned a confidential number, not in alphabetical order, using form provided. The teacher will score the paper and remove tab with name so that no name will be associated with any writing sample

#### **Day 1: Treatment #1**

- Pass out pre labeled templates of writing form to students
- Write writing topic on board and read aloud
- Let students know they have 20 minutes to write on the topic
- Do not intervene or make any comments to students
- Students write independently without intervention
- Collect writing sample
- Grade/score/review and give feedback to student
- Remove name label and give writing samples to study administrator

#### **Day 2: Treatment #2**

- Pass out pre labeled templates of writing form to students
- Write writing topic on board and read aloud
- Let students know they have 20 minutes to write on the topic
- Students write independently with intervention
- Use list of acceptable comments (attached) and record comments used
- Collect writing sample
- Grade/score/review and give feedback to student

Remove name label and give writing samples to study administrator

### Day 3: Treatment #3

Pass out pre labeled templates of writing form to students

Write writing topic on board and read aloud

Let students know they have 20 minutes to write on the topic

Students write independently with intervention of content specific prompting

Use list of content specific acceptable comments

Record list of comments used on attached sheet

Collect writing sample

Grade/score/review and give feedback to student

Remove name label and give writing samples to study administrator

Each day submit all writing samples in envelopes provided to study administrator

If a student is absent, write absent on template and submit with writing samples

## APPENDIX G: STUDENT WRITING TEMPLATE

STUDENT NUMBER:

STUDENT SCHOOL:

TOPIC:

DATE:

STUDENT ROOM:

**DIRECTIONS:** You have 20 minutes to write on this topic. Include as many details as you can. Use pencils that are provided and you may write in either cursive or manuscript.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Student ID \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX H: STUDENT INFORMATION AND NUMBER ASSIGNMENT

Stud. Num/ Class	Student Name	School	Grade Level	Reading Score
1 A				
2 A				
3 A				
4 A				
5 A				
6 A				
7 A				
8 A				
9 A				
10 A				
11 A				
12 A				
13 A				
14 A				
15 A				
16 A				
17 A				
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19 A				
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22 A				
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107 E				
108 F				
109 F				

110 F				
111 F				
112 F				
113 F				
114 F				
115 F				
116 F				

## VITA

MINDY S. ALLENGER

### Education

- 2004      MA Reading Education  
            Marshall University  
            Huntington, West Virginia  
            Cumulative GPA 4.00
- 1993      Multiple Subjects Teaching Credential  
            California State University Fresno  
            Fresno, California  
            Cumulative GPA 4.00
- 1992      BA Liberal Studies  
            California State University Stanislaus  
            Stanislaus, California  
            Cumulative GPA 3.21

### Work Experience

- 2008 – 2015   Assistant Professor Curriculum and Instruction  
                 College of Education  
                 Marshall University  
                 Huntington, West Virginia
- 2006 – 2007   Reading Specialist  
                 Sacred Heart Grade School  
                 Charleston, West Virginia
- 1994 – 2006   Elementary Classroom Teacher  
                 Charleston WV and Fresno CA

### Publications

- Allenger, M., Jeffers, C., and Skoretz, Y. *Review of Best Practices in Literacy Instruction*, ed. L. Gambrell, L. Morrow, and M. Pressley. *The Reading Professor* Winter 2008. 30:2.